

Halo: To Hell and Back

by ten42inthePM

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Summary: Master Chief must lead a daring assault on the Covenant homeworld. Facing impossible odds, humanity's survival depends on the courage of a newly formed team of Spartans, along with the most battle hardened Marines and an advanced UNSC battlefleet.

1. Chapter I: Brief Respite

HALO: To Hell and Back

>
Disclaimer: Halo belongs completely to Bungie and Microsoft, and I along with a billion other gamers around the world thank them for putting together such an outstanding game. The characters all belong to them, all the original Spartans, all the book characters and the game itself. I have taken creative liberties with where I think the storyline could go and so I hope everyone can enjoy the work since I am not trying to make a profit, but instead just trying to write a good, entertaining story. Thanks to Eric Nylund for writing such intense books and giving me lots of information to base my own feeble attempts at writing on. All the characters I created are completely fictional and so any resemblance to a real person is purely coincidental and non-intentional.

>
 Master Chief and the surviving first generation Spartans get upgraded and meet the second generation of ultimate warriors. These few, along with a fleet of Earth's most advanced warships and their most seasoned divisions of Marines, will attempt the unthinkable. An attack on the Covenant home world in Covenant controlled space, which was previously, and rightly so, thought impenetrable. They do so with the hope to put an end to the most costly war in human history.

>
 Chapter I. Brief Respite

>
 Following the successful but costly defense of Earth, thanks to the daring operations by the Spartans and revolutionary new technologies that finally put UNSC warships on par with the vaunted Covenant fleet, the human race was busy healing its wounds and preparing for a final counterattack.

>
 Civilian life had been put on hold as the entirety of Earth and remaining Inner Colonies was put into action building the new

advanced warships, producing combat materials, and training new personnel. The morale of the entire human race was at an all time high and for the first time since first contact, mankind held a decisive advantage.

>
 Thanks to the Halo information and Covenant technology and programs that Cortana brought back revolutionized the human arsenal. Suddenly terran science was propelled hundreds of years into the future with new understandings of how the Covenant utilized their technology, or rather, didn't utilize.

>
 Upon first analyzing Covenant technology, Cortana confirmed that the Covenant themselves had stolen the technology from other races, and did not know how to utilize it to its maximum potential. She also predicted that if the human race had gained enough access to the advanced technology themselves, they could out think the Covenant and turn the tides of the war.

>
 She had been correct. While the Covenant imitated, the human race innovated. They had been forced to adapt throughout the war just to stay alive, and now that scientist, engineers, and technicians had been given the hard data they needed, they had been able to turn out wonders of science never before thought possible. Now the human race held the technological advantage over the Covenant, and the Spartans will turn all hell loose on the aliens to end their threat forever.

>
 0800 Hours Zulu, Sarajevo Base, Nevada desert, Earth.

>
 Master Chief walked briskly down the halls of the Sarajevo Base complex. The fluorescent lights seemed too bright for his unshielded eyes and though fully clothed in combat fatigues, John felt starkly naked without his Mjolnir armor. The techs had taken his armor off several hours before and the Master Chief was anxious to get to his mission briefing and hopefully return to his armor.

>
 After what seemed like a terribly long time of walking through the halls feeling exposed, John reached the loading bay he had been looking for and hit the access button for the door. Twin titanium doors slid sideways and he stepped through into an expansive bay, filled mostly with empty space save for what looked like a tech station and a small gathering area. An admiral that John had never seen before was waiting for him, as well as all his fellow Spartans. They all looked slightly uncomfortable as they were also without their armor.

>
 John came to attention in front of the admiral.

>
 "Spartan-117 reporting as ordered."

>
 The admiral nodded and gestured to where the others were standing.

>
 "Stand at ease Master Chief."

>
 John stood at the front of the small group of Spartans and watched the admiral silently as he rubbed a slightly wrinkled hand over his bald head.

>
 "I'm sorry if I seem a bit fatigued Spartans, but the truth is that I am. This damn war had taken its toll on me, on all of us. But now we are in position to put an end to it all. I'll explain in a minute, but first, I'd like you to meet your new teammates."

>
 The admiral turned and hit the intercom by the door.

>
 "You may enter Black team."

>
 A second set of entry doors hissed open and all the Spartans turned their heads to look at the new arrivals. John was fully expecting a unit of ODSTs to come walking through the doors and was completely unprepared for what he saw.

>
 A large group of black armored figures came striding through the doors. Master Chief and the other Spartans did a double take at these others that apparently wore Mjolnir armor.

>
 "Master Chief, Spartans, I'd like you to meet the second class of graduated Spartans."

>
 The lead armored Spartan pressed the seal releases and pulled his helmet off. All the other black figures followed suit and the Master Chief was confronted by a group of young, hard faces.

>
 "Master Chief, it's an honor to finally meet you and the other Spartans. Spartan-204 reporting."

>
 The young Asian looking Spartan came to attention before John as did the rest of his team, and John quickly acknowledged them.

>
 "What's your name Spartan?"

>
 "Jason sir."

>
 The two warriors shook hands and John marveled at the control the young Spartan exhibited. His hand was hardly pressured in the armored grip, a feat John had not managed to achieve until his third month in armor. But before any further introductions could be made, the admiral stepped forward.

>
 "Now Master Chief, I know you and your team are feeling kind of antsy without your armor, so we'll get you back together now. You'll find quite a few changes to what you're used to, many new advances and abilities. They are in actuality, new suits, but retain the same things that made the Mjolnir armor you used before. So if you and your team would head to those techs, they'll outfit you. We don't have a briefing room to accommodate you all, so once you're ready, we've set up a briefing area over there."

>
 John snapped to attention but the admiral waved him off.

>
 "No need Master Chief, just double time it to the briefing. Our time is precious and there's not a moment to lose."

>
 John nodded and jogged to the waiting techs. His team followed him as the new Spartans followed the admiral to where benches and a projector had been set.

>
 "We have your new suit here Master Chief."

>
 John stepped up to the tech as he wheeled up a large rack with a new black Mjolnir suit on it. It looked basically the same as his old suit, but John noticed several differences. The alloy plates were larger, and less of the interwoven composite material was visible. The shield emitters appeared to be shrouded by a dark surface and no longer glowed. There also appeared to be numerous small nubs inconspicuously placed on the armor's surface, and John wondered what function they might perform.

>
 The tech asked John to strip down so they could prepare him for his neural interface and he did so as he looked at the progress of the rest of his Spartans. Most were also being prepared for interface, but Kelly was already getting her armor fitted to her body. She was always the first at everything, the fastest of them all.

>
 Something cold touched John's neck and he felt the hair on his arms rise as the tech swabbed his neural jack. Soon after, other techs began fitting armor components to his body. John stood silently through the process, only moving when a tech asked him to do so. After about twenty minutes, John was completely encased in his armor, save for his helmet. It was beginning to feel hot in the unpowered suit, but John said nothing.

>
 "Bear with me just a minute longer Master Chief. There're just a few more parts to the power up procedure than before. We'll have you powered in a few more seconds."

>
 John only nodded and seconds later the suit hummed to life as promised. Immediately the internal components cooled against his skin and he felt secure once again. He had been the last to have his suit

activated and once he picked up his helmet, his team headed for the briefing area.

>
 The remaining original Spartans numbered only eight now, including John. Only four of twenty seven had survived the devastating, but unavoidable casualties during the defense of Reach and Earth campaigns. But seven other remaining Spartans was a much better figure than when John believed he was the sole remaining Spartan. Three other Spartans who had been engaged far from the major conflicts had finally been recalled and were reunited with their teammates. And now there was another team of super warriors to bolster the UNSC ranks and take the fight to the Covenant.

>
 Master Chief and the older Spartans quickly sat amongst their new teammates, much more comfortable in their armor. Once they were all seated, the admiral stepped up in front of them.

>
 "Well now, we can finally begin. As some of you may know, but probably shouldn't, I am Admiral Cole. I have been here since the very beginning, fighting the damned Covenant. And since the beginning it has been a losing battle. Their technology has always outclassed ours in space, and so we've never been able to really hold our ground against them. Sometimes, many times, we've had to leave good people behind to die, and I'm sick of it! I'm sick of seeing our people and our ships getting pasted by the damned religious heretics."

>
 Admiral Cole slammed his fist down on the table holding the projected and nearly knocked it off the edge. All the Spartans could identify with the Admiral's anger and when he slowly unclenched his fist, many found that their hands were also clenched in rage. The Admiral regained his composure and continued.

>
 "But now the tables have finally turned, and for the first time, truly, it is our turn Spartans."

>
 Cole turned and flicked a switch on the projector and beamed three dimensional images of a fleet of human warships into the air. The ships were clearly from the UNSC fleet, but were of designs and classes that John did not recognize.

>
 "These are the newest additions of the UNSC fleet. All these ships are the pinnacle of advancement and combination of human, Covenant, and Forerunner technologies. We've even utilized certain aspects of Flood biochemistry to enhance the repair capabilities of our ships, and also your suits."

>
 John gave the Admiral a worried look once he mentioned the Flood, but Cole waved a reassuring hand.

>
 "No worries Master Chief, we haven't even seen an actual Flood organism, living or dead. We just used principles of their biology and regenerative capabilities to allow our ships and your armor to mend themselves in combat. This is the information we extracted from that data disk you gave us on the Flood Master Chief. The potential of technology we could extrapolate is enormous, if only we had more information."

>
 John winced slightly on the inside, remembering what he had done with the original disk containing the in depth Flood information, but also remembered Sergeant Avery Johnson and that he was still alive today. He relaxed slightly, but noticed for the first time a new mechanism on the power unit of the Spartan in front of him. Several small antennas jutted up from a small shrouded box and John wondered what function it might perform, but the Admiral beginning again interrupted his thoughts.

>
 "This battle fleet is centered around the Supercarrier Hornet and the three Main Battlecruisers Atlantis, Titan, and Impervious. There are a dozen other cruisers, both light and heavy, as well as numerous destroyers and frigates. The regular carriers Eisenhower II and the Centauri Prime have also been added to the fleet. Now this

may not seem like much of a battle fleet, especially against the Covenant, because it numbers only around seventy-five ships. But let me assure you all, these ships have been created to be the finest vessels of war ever to have been seen by mortal eyes, human, Covenant, or otherwise. For the very first time, we have ships that will put anything the Covenant has to shame. Even our simple troop carriers have the defenses and armaments to rate cruiser in a Covenant fleet. But make no mistake Spartans, we will need every one of these ships, and every one of you to win this upcoming battle. Now to explain your mission, here is a friend of mine, and of some of you as well."

>
 Out of another single person door rolled an automated chair bearing a familiar smiling face.

>
 "Greetings Spartans, old and new. I am Fajad, formerly Spartan-022, but now of Naval Intelligence."

>
 John recognized his long lost friend, and fought the urge to run up to him and crush him in a bear hug, but resisted and settled to smile instead.

>
 "You my friends are tasked with the most difficult and important mission ever in the history of mankind. You are to enter Covenant controlled space, and make total war on the Covenant home world. To even attempt a mission such as this has been made possible by our sudden advances in technology. The Covenant never expected us to be able to threaten their home world, and so made no effort to hide its location. Their defenses around the planet are so numerous and powerful, they would invite an open attack on it by our entire combined military force with little to fear. Our recon drones have revealed thousands upon thousands of ships in orbit through out the system."

>
 Fajad clicked a button on the armrest of his chair and the projector cycled images. The image was now a single Covenant cruiser against a backdrop of innumerable stars. John was puzzled. A single cruiser in place of thousands? And it's not even anything special, just like every other cruiser in their fleet. Ordinarily a single cruiser would be an even match for a dozen UNSC destroyers, but even still, a single ship?

>
 "Don't be fooled. Those aren't stars. Those are all Covenant ships."

>
 Upon closer examination, the projection proved Fajad correct. Thousands of cruisers, carriers, and destroyers floated through the image.

>
 "Our plan is to send you, three divisions of our most battle hardened Marines, as well as a division of the roughest ODSTs along with our battle fleet to destroy the Covenant armada, and capture or destroy their home planet. Any questions?"

>
 Fajad smiled and looked at the Spartans who sat silently in awe of their suicide mission.

>
 "Of course we will have to soften their defenses for the fleet, because though our ships are now vastly superior, our fleet would still be very hard pressed to defeat their numbers. And so we are sending eight unmanned troop carriers, each with ten planet buster augmented nukes and an expansion field to hopefully clear our a sizeable portion of their fleets. From that point, you all will be on your own against the full wrath of the Covenant."

>
 Fajad smiled again before clicking the projector back to the UNSC battle fleet. He reached out and touched the graphic representation of the Supercarrier Hornet. The graphic enlarged and split into schematics of the entire ship and its many profiles. The ships crew and Marine complement scrolled down along with a dozen other statistics.

>
 "The Supercarrier Hornet. Fully two miles long, with sixty launching bays, four hundred plasma turrets, a thousand close defense cannon turrets, six hundred laser turrets, and one Super MAC gun. Her armor is ten meters of ablative titanium A with a ceramic plate coating. She has dispersive repulsion shields with interlock capability. Her power plant is the newest generation of nuclear, fusion, and biological power combinations. She carries six wings of Longsword interceptors, Fury attack fighters, and Skyhawk bombers. She also carries two wings of Pelicans and has a troop carrying capacity of eight divisions in addition to her onboard complement of one regiment. Her crew numbers twenty eight hundred and she has hyperspace provisions and life-support to carry her full crew and Marine complement indefinitely. This is just to give you an idea of the heat that our fleet is packing so you don't go into this thinking it's a suicide mission. We fully expect to win."

>
 "Even with all the advancements, what hope do we have against the entire Covenant force? They'll just vaporize our ships the second we jump into their space."

>
 "That's why we're sending the nukes in first. Those should give the fleet some breathing space, then the ships defensive and offensive capabilities will take care of the rest. Just wait John, you'll see."

>
 "Intel is your field. I'll take your word for it."

>
 Fajad and John smiled at each other as the Admiral once again took center stage.

>
 "Ok Master Chief, I'm going to turn you over to Jason and his team to bring you up to speed on the new armor. Those suits of yours can do things you've never even imagined. So be ready."

>
 Cole stood up again and every Spartan immediately stood at attention. They remained that way until the Admiral strode out of the room with Fajad in tow. Then the young Spartan in front of John turned around and smiled.

>
 "I think you're going to love the new suits Master Chief. These really can do things you're not ready for. We'll show some of you vet Spartans a thing or two. But first, I'll need your fastest Spartan."

>
 John smiled at the thought of anyone, old Spartan or otherwise, showing Kelly anything. She was so incredibly fast, not another warrior could touch her.

>
 "Kelly, front and center."

>
 The Spartans all formed a circle as Kelly walked into the middle. She glared at Jason before sealing her helmet to her armor and standing ready.

>
 "Boxer, in the ring."

>
 Another young Spartan, of Asian descent and strikingly beautiful, stepped into the circle and smiled as she sealed her helmet. The two Spartans assumed fighting stances and began circling in the ring.

>
 "Master Chief, I think for it to be fair, your Spartan should start first. And as a matter of fact, I think she should have a teammate or two."

>
 "I think you may be underestimating my team Jason."

>
 "No sir, not at all. It's just that they don't know how to use the suits yet. That's what we're going to teach them to do now. And to best showcase the suits capabilities, the combat scenario should be stacked against it."

>
 "If you say so. Linda, you're up too."

>
 Linda put her helmet on and stepped into the ring. Boxer moved into the center and Kelly and Linda slowly circled around her. Without warning, Linda feinted from the side and Kelly flashed

forward to strike Boxer from behind. Kelly's speed was dazzling, and any person, even any Spartan would have been floored. Any Spartan in an old Mjolnir suit.

>
 But Boxer was in a new suit, and fully understood the suit's capabilities. And that suit was about to open the Spartans up to a whole new type of combat. Before Kelly's blow hit her, Boxer's suit distorted then vanished, and Kelly's fist snapped through empty air. Both her and Linda froze in confusion and disbelief.

>
 No way is anyone that fast. She could not have gotten out of the way, and without me seeing her. Nobody is that fast, nobody is faster than me.

>
 Incredible, she dodged Kelly's attack. Nobody could be that fast, Kelly is the fastest around.

>
 Master Chief stared and his eye brows arched in confusion. Then Boxer reappeared above and behind Kelly. Her form was in mid bicycle kick when she blinked back into existence and she completed the motion, slamming her foot into Kelly's helmet. She crumbled under the blow but before she was even falling, Boxer winked out of view again and came back on Linda's shoulders. Linda suddenly had feet wrapped around her neck and was being launched into the air by Boxer's front flip.

>
 Boxer never hit the floor but disappeared again and reappeared directly in Linda's flight path. She launched a massive roundhouse kick at Linda and smashed her out of the air. Linda flipped and crashed into the ground, laying still.

>
 Kelly sprung to her feet and advanced on Boxer with a newfound wariness. Inside her helmet, Boxer smiled as she teleported to behind Kelly once again. But this time Kelly was prepared. The instant she saw Boxer's image distort, she spun low and swept her leg around. True to her anticipation, Boxer materialized right as her leg came around and Kelly took her out.

>
 Master Chief smiled at Kelly's lighting fast adaptation and attack, but instantly returned to staring and Boxer disappeared again before hitting the ground and reappeared above Kelly's head. This time a reverse bicycle kick planted her heel in Kelly's visor and put her down.

>
 Boxer vanished before she landed again and popped into existence right in front of John, standing at ease. John held his ground, not batting an eyelid even though he was thoroughly startled.

>
 "Good enough Boxer, I think they've gotten the idea."

>
 John gathered his composure and nodded to the young Spartan. He smirked as she removed her helmet and Jason cracked a large smile.

>
 "I'm suitably impressed Spartan. These new suits seem to have the goods. Kelly's never been bested in hand to hand combat.

Explain."

>
 "Yes sir. See our techies have harnessed the Forerunner teleportation technology and combined it with the new navigational systems that Cortana derived from the Covenant ships."

>
 He pointed to the nubs on Boxer's suit and said, "These are the field emitters. The form a teleportation field over the suit and any marked equipment."

>
 "Now what do you mean by that."

>
 "The suit will transport any equipment that the computer knows you have. You have to put a small marker on it and the suit will know to keep it. Other wise it will get left behind. You can find these markers in a dispenser on the left forearm. And the weapons or equipment have to be within a one yard radius of the suit, otherwise they are outside the field's range. But the whole process is a lot

easier with an AI because they can more readily discern what you want to keep and what you don't, even without the markers."

>
 "Ok, so how do you navigate this thing?"

>
 Boxer spun around and Jason pointed to the small antenna box.

>
 "That's the navigation control box. And the beauty of it is that you can simply think of where you want to go. If you can see you target location, visualize it, or have previously been there, then the suit can take you there. You can also enter spacial coordinates just like a slipspace jump. For example we could teleport from the bay of a Pelican to a specific point inside an enemy base if we can see it or know the coordinates. And the suit remembers any location you have previously been and logs the coordinates for later use, so if you visualize one of those places, you will go there."

>
 "Outstanding. And what is the operational range of the suits?"

>
 "Well the technology itself is basically unlimited in its capability and range, but the power required for long jumps is hard for the power plants to furnish at short notice. The suits are calibrated to provide enough power for a thousand kilometer jump max. you could of course change this setting, but the techies foresaw no need for a larger jump than that. This is the most versatile setting to provide for range and combat maneuvers. So we could jump from a ship in high orbit to the planet's surface. And the power requirements are proportional to the distance of the jump, so the smaller the jump, the less power you need. And of course the suit regenerates available jump charge over time, just like your shields. It takes about a standard hour to recharge to maximum power after a complete discharge. So after one max range jump, you would have to wait an hour before doing it again. And combat maneuvers, like Boxer was performing, drain little power. You could perform probably a million before discharging the capacitor."

>
 John nodded his head in approval. The older Spartans were also impressed. Kelly and Linda had since recovered from the bout and were listening eagerly about the technology that had bested the both of them.

>
 "How do we activate the jumps? Just think it?"

>
 "There are two modes of jumping. The first is the mental mode, and all you do is think it. It takes some getting used to, but once you're up to par, you'll be able to replicate what Boxer was doing and show us some new moves as well. The second mode is the voice mode, and it requires a voice command to jump. Simply set the coordinates, then speak your command and you're away. You can activate either on your HUD."

>
 "That's some sharp stuff. Well let's get to training. Younger Spartans, I would appreciate greatly if you could teach us older ones the finer nuances of controlling these suits. We need to mesh our teams together to form the most lethal fighting group to ever exist. The Covenant will pay for all the casualties they've inflicted, on us and on the rest of the human race."

>
 The Spartans all nodded and understood. They would finally be able to pay the Covenant in full for the atrocities they had committed, and for all the people they had killed. It was a final vindication for the older Spartans, and a fulfilling of purpose for the younger.

>
 And so began the training. The new Spartans taught the old about the equipment and capabilities, and vice versa the old taught the new what they knew about the war and the enemy.

>
 The Spartans had transferred to the Hornet for the trip to the Covenant home world and were working on more hand to hand techniques

when John had told them about the Brutes. He had faced the powerful warriors and bested them, just barely, on the Unyielding Heirophant. He was in the middle of telling the Spartans about the Brutes terrible strength and ferocity when Jason suddenly perked up.

>
 "Master Chief, if I may interrupt for a minute. I think I have something that may help us against these Brutes, but more specifically against the Elites with plasma swords."

>
 "The floor is yours Petty Officer."

>
 Jason pulled an eight inch black tube from a joint in his armor and snapped it out. The tube telescoped to a twenty one inch baton. It looked to be the basic design of collapsible baton used by police forces in the early twenty first century. John almost laughed as a rifle would prove to be just as effective a club as that small baton.

>
 "Um Petty Officer, I believe you may have misunderstood me when I said that these Brutes are in fact stronger than Spartans in Mjolnir armor. How will a small hand to hand weapon help us? I only beat the one I fought with a grenade to the belly."

>
 Jason smiled as he brandished the baton and twirled it expertly between his fingers.

>
 "No Master Chief, no misunderstanding. There are two parts that will help level the playing field with these Brutes. First, the new suits will boost your strength two fold over the old suits, and second and most importantly is this baton."

>
 John almost laughed until the young Spartan hit an activator on the bottom of the baton. And instant later the baton was alight with glowing plasma. The brightness of the plasma illuminated Jason's face in an eerie glow, even in the brightly lit room.

>
 "Master Chief, I would like to introduce you to the PCW-10 plasma baton. This was developed for us by the boys at R&D to combat the threat that plasma sword Elites posed. We never had a weapon to counter those swords, so the only hope was to kill them before they got to you. Now I've never seen how fast those things moved, but from what Marines have told me they were damn fast, even for a Spartan to fight. So we have these, they will project a plasma field around the baton and counter blows from a plasma sword. You will find that they will cut through most anything, opening up a whole new world of door breaching. And so from what you said about these Brutes, I figured it would be useful to mention now."

>
 Jason deactivated the baton and it immediately reverted back to a plain black stick. He snapped it back down to compact size and reinserted it into the joint of the armor just above the hip. Then he gestured to John to pull his own out, and John reached back and removed the small weapon from the concealed compartment. He snapped it out and activated it in one smooth motion and was instantly holding fiery death in his hand.

>
 "Outstanding. Well you were right Petty Officer, this should level the playing field dramatically."

>
 The Spartans continued training each other on hand to hand combat techniques, and for the better part of a week, only Linda and the three other snipers from the younger class touched a projectile weapon. She tutored them on custom layouts for their sniper rifles that would be most efficient and effective on the battle field, and they would ask questions about certain combat scenarios for her advice.

>
 During the training period, the new and old Spartans embraced each other and formed a tightly knit group, almost identical to the original class. Once again the Spartans were a team and could operate to their maximum effectiveness. They no longer referred to one another as new or old, but just as Spartans, as teammates.

>
 In the second week of the jump to Covenant space, the Spartans began to re-familiarize themselves with their weapons. They all worked on marksmanship in the firing ranges, but also took a special opportunity when the fleet came out of slipspace to repair some damaged equipment on a destroyer. The Spartans took nearly all of their weapons and went EVA to practice their shooting in vacuum and null G.

>
 John watched as his team fired thousands of rounds into the void, targeting small drones that had been launched to facilitate their training. It always seemed odd to John to watch an assault rifle be fired in space and see the muzzle flash, but not hear the attendant report. Will emptied a magazine into a drone at extreme range and blew it to pieces, but was pushed slightly backwards by the recoil. He countered with his thruster pack and was stabilized again just in time to hear Linda mock him.

>
 "You call that marksmanship Will? The worst Marine in the fleet shoots better than that."

>
 She calmly shouldered her sniper rifle and radioed to the cruiser to have another wave of drones launched. At the far end of the cruiser, in one of its first launch bays, a flight of twelve drones flew into space. Well over four kilometers away, the drones only registered to the Spartans as red light in the darkness.

>
 Everyone stopped to watch what would surely be a fantastic display of marksmanship. Linda tracked her first target and calmly fired off her first round. The flight path of the hypersonic sabot round was indiscernible in space for lack of an ionization trail because there was no atmosphere. But before the first drone was destroyed, Linda smoothly fired three more times at second intervals and ejected the spent magazine. She never took her eye away from the scope and locked another in place while following her next target. The first light vanished as she racked the charging handle on the rifle and three more quickly after that. Linda fired another four rounds, each time firing a burst from her thruster pack to keep her stable. Another reload and four more rounds later each drone was destroyed.

>
 Linda slung her rifle over her shoulder and put her hand on her hip as if she were standing on solid ground. Her thruster pack fired and she rotated to face James and everyone knew there was a self-satisfied smirk on her face.

>
 "Now that is good shooting."

>
 The Spartans all clapped, and though it was silent in the void, their cheers and adulation could be heard over the com. She took a moment to bow, a maneuver somewhat difficult to perform in null G and without a solid surface to stand on, but completed the motion with a flourish of her hands.

>
 "Well done Linda. We all feel better knowing we have you covering our backs."

>
 "Now after a display like that, none of us regular Spartans are going to put on a better show. Let's call it a day and head in."

>
 The Spartans all jetted their way to the two waiting Pelicans and jammed themselves inside. It was an extremely tight fit inside the troop bays and the crews could not even close the doors because Spartans were hanging out of the opening. The Pelicans flew back to the carrier and entered a launch bay. As the Pelicans landed and the Spartans debarked, a patrol of Lancers returned to the carrier and set down.

>
 "That means we're going to jump soon Spartans. I want everyone back in the training bay and working on teleport drills until 1800 hours. Then break for chow and rest up. Jason, you're with me, we've

got to report to the Admiral on the bridge."

>
 The Spartans disappeared as they teleported to the training bay and Jason stepped up next to the Master Chief as he began walking to the bridge. The Spartans avoided jumping to anywhere on the ship except for the training bay because if an unarmored human, or any human for that matter were in the spot a Spartan jumped to, the half ton of Mjolnir armor would violently displace them, probably killing them in the process.

>
 The two Spartans arrived at the bridge several minutes later and stood at attention behind the Admiral after passing the Marine guards outside. They had been ordered to receive their suit AI's for the mission and their presence on the bridge raised the thickness of the atmosphere for the crew. While the crew was all combat veterans, virtually none had seen an armored Spartan up close before. In fact, most all of the crews whom John had served with, had been killed in combat.

>
 The two super warriors dwarfed even the largest people around them. Their black armor stood over two meters and was a stark contrast to the light grays and steel of the bridge.

>
 "Admiral sir, Master Chief and Petty Officer Spartans reporting."

>
 "Stand at ease Spartans, we have your operating AI's and will be giving them to you presently. I would have liked to let every one of your Spartans to have an AI, but we were hard pressed to procure these two and the three for this ship. Additionally every ship in this fleet had to have at least two top grade AI's to run their functions and raise their combat effectiveness so two was all we could get for you."

>
 Cole went to the tech officer's station and pulled two AI chips from the console. He walked back to the Spartans and handed them the chips.

>
 "Master Chief, you've had the pleasure of working with this AI before. She's been relieved of all her Halo, Covenant, and Flood data, and so she will be operating at optimum efficiency again. She's just like new. And Petty Officer, your AI is new to the Spec Ops community, but she's top of the line in combat support and second to none in Games and Theory."

>
 The Spartans gingerly accepted the chips and inserted them into the data ports in their helmets. Once again John felt the liquid chill of an AI intelligence entering his mind and for Jason the new experience was startling.

>
 "Chief, it's nice to see you again. I see your suit is a bit different, some upgrades in here. Should increase your overall combat effectiveness over three hundred percent. The Covenant won't even know what hit them. But it's good to see you're still the same old Master Chief."

>
 "Thank you Cortana. It's good to uh... work with you again. It's been a while."

>
 "Aww Chief, did you miss me? I knew you just couldn't live without me, I am an imperative in your world I'm sure."

>
 "I thought I did before, but now I'm not so sure."

>
 "Well aren't you just the cheeriest person around."

>
 Jason was still adjusting to the new sensation of having another person inside himself with him, and was just as startled when she began talking to him.

>
 "Greetings Petty Officer. My name is Victoria, and I look forward to working with you. It seems you are much more intelligent than the other AI's would have me believe, and Cortana is right, these suits will make you much more combat effective."

>
 "Well thank you Victoria. I was trained by the best, and with

the best. So you can expect nothing but the best from me."

>
 "Hmmm... Hubris. I didn't expect that from a Spartan. You sound like a Marine."

>
 "I've spent most of my life beating Marines to be ready for now."

>
 "Don't let it go to your head Spartan. The Covenant have spent millennia wiping out advanced races that didn't suit their liking, and this entire war wiping out Marines."

>
 The Spartan nodded his head in acceptance as another voice came from across the bridge.

>
 "I wouldn't count on the Covies wiping out this Marine ladies. Them and the Flood couldn't do it before, they sure as hell won't do it now."

>
 John turned to face a smiling Sergeant Avery Johnson. He wore a combat armor that John had never seen before that looked like regular Marine armor, but was jet black and had a larger power pack and shield emitters.

>
 "Sergeant, I'm glad you could make it."

>
 "Wouldn't miss this party for the world Master Chief. And you can bank on the Marines being there to cover your ass when you battle junkies run into trouble and cry for Mama."

>
 Johnson smiled again and left the bridge, off to prepare his own unit.

>
 "You can look forward to a lot more help from the Marines this time around Master Chief. They could hold their own against the Covenant before, but now they have armor that makes them as tough as you were in your old Mjolnir armor. Not quite impervious, and no enhancements, but those hard ass Marines can back up what they say now."

>
 "I remember them being tough as nails before Admiral, because they didn't have shields."

>
 "Exactly Master Chief. All the Marines with this fleet are combat veterans and so they still have that mentality. Only now they're better protected and are more combat effective. Imagine what the Covenant is facing now. Four divisions of crack Marines and a new unit of super warriors whom they could kill only at the expense of thousands of their warriors. We're going to take the fight to them. Now get back to training your unit. We have three more days until we arrive in Covenant space."

>
 John and Jason came to attention before the Admiral then disappeared. Cole smiled at the havoc those Spartans would wreak on the enemy before turning back to his work.

>
 The Spartans arrived on what they had previously designated as the teleport arrival pad. All Spartans would jump to there to avoid violently displacing anyone else in the room. Of course the armored Spartans would not be hurt, but it would be an annoying nuisance to experience over and over again.

>
 "Ok Spartans, we have two ladies here who are going to help us take the Covenant down. Now we have three days left, lets train hard to make sure we're ready when we get there. I want rotating groups working on teleporting, weapons, and combat scenarios. Let's get to it."

>
 The Spartans immediately sprung into action and the training bay was a flurry of motion and action as Spartans jumped here and there, throughout the room while sparring with each other. Kelly had mastered the teleport concept and was once again her most dangerous self, but Boxer seemed to be a match for her. Kelly enjoyed her company immensely and the two constantly challenged each other since no others really could and were virtually inseparable.

>
 At the moment, the two were clashing in a sparring section and

a few other Spartans watched in amazement as they waited for their turn. Kelly and Boxer were only visible in flashes as they maneuvered to get the best of the other, but it was a draw. The flashed in and out of existence, throwing punches here, kicking there, but never really landing a blow. They anticipated each other far to well and reacted far to quickly to even allow a single blow.

>
 The Spartans continued their grueling training for two more days, and one day from Covenant space, they stopped to be briefed. They sat once again in the briefing seats and projections of Cortana and Victoria stood before them. They were analyzing and designating Covenant defenses as they came across them, but little was known about the alien planet at this point.

>
 "Our main target is this temple. It is located on the eastern tip of the only continent on the planet. Our mission is the jump down and kick open the door for the Marines to storm and occupy the temple. We have also been tasked with taking out the main defenses and critical targets of the temple. For instance we'll be the ones searching out and eliminating all Brute forces in the temple. After gaining access to the temple, this will become our main mission. Our newly ramped up Marines should have no trouble dealing with any of the other Covenant forces."

>
 Victoria moved forward and indicated a large entrance at the base of the temple on the three dimensional schematic. The entrance enlarged and rotated, and presented itself to the assembled Spartans. The door was the standard Covenant design, four matching segments that came together to seal the entrance. Victoria showed the Spartans where the entry controls were and also called up a cross section of the doors.

>
 "Don't even think about using any type of explosive or breaching charge on these doors Spartans, they are ten meters of solid Covenant alloy. The MAC guns on the old UNSC ships would have a hell of a time even denting that. You must activate the door access panels here, by bringing either myself or Cortana to one or the other, so we can tap into the Covenant net and disable their defenses and control their net."

>
 Master Chief committed the information to memory as every other Spartan did, noting potential weaknesses in the Covenant defenses, as well as alternate routes to their objectives. Soon, Cortana took center stage and activated a recording from the suit cameras of the original surviving Spartans. John recognized the combat recordings of his team on the Unyielding Hierophant of the Brutes.

>
 "These are the Covenant Brutes. They are classified as a sort of ceremonial guard. They were present in limited numbers on the Unyielding Hierophant, and ONI informs us to expect at least a battalion inside the temple, and countless more on the planet. It will become your primary mission to eliminate these 'Brute forces' and allow for a smoother take over of the temple. You will also need to respond to any call for assistance by Marine forces in dealing with Brutes."

>
 The hologram projected the image of three high velocity grenades impacting Grace and blowing her in two, her armor no protection against the fearsome weapons. John saw the recording was from Will's suit, and he also saw Will cringe at the sight of their comrade dying again.

>
 "Master Chief, I will leave the tactical decisions up to you and your team, but this is what we have to do, and this is all the information we have at the present. Realize this Spartans, we are in fact going in as blindly as a newborn baby into a blacked out room. We will have to gather intel on the spot and provide pinpoint support for the entire Marine operation. This is a huge workload for a team

numbering only fifty five, but I have the utmost certainty that you will succeed."

>
 Cortana and Victoria blinked off as the projector shut down and all the Spartans stood up. John and Jason retrieved their AI disks and reinserted the AI's into their suits. They turned and faced their teammates as Master Chief addressed them.

>
 "Spartans, I realize that we are a newly assembled team, with new Spartans, and old. But the key factor is that we are all Spartans. We all went through the same training and received the same lumps. Some of you have seen combat against the most ferocious enemies mankind has ever faced and survived. So there is no reason why the rest of you should not follow suit. We have the initiative, and we are on the assault. Let it be known to the entire extended universe and its inhabitants, that Spartans are second to none when on the attack. We will strike hard and fast, and leave no doubt that every single enemy we meet will die. Our mission is to save humanity, to make safe the universe so that children can grow without the fear of war, or death. And at this, we must not fail. We shall not fail. Square away your gear. I want the armory checked out, and every single rifle, pistol, shotgun, and rocketlauncher to be cleaned and loaded for combat. Prepare everything, because we will not be coming back for more. Move out."

>
 The Spartans garbed for war and prepared for the mission to end the Covenant. Looks of solid determination came over their faces and they prepared their selves to make total war upon the most dreaded enemy, prepared to fight, and prepared to die.

2. Chapter II: Assault

Chapter II: Assault

>
 The Pelican bay was a flurry of motion as Spartans broke open munitions crates and leaded weapons. Each Spartan selected his or her weapons based on what their individual needs in combat would be. John had never been very picky about what weapons his team used, so long as they used them proficiently to support each other.

>
 Linda and her four person sniper detail carried an assortment of modified sniper rifles and battle rifles. Ammunition packs had been attached to their armor wherever possible and John knew that the assault force could depend upon the pinpoint accuracy and fire support of the Spartan snipers.

>
 The rest of the other Spartans selected a devastating and varied arsenal of weapons for combat. John saw assault rifles and shotguns, battle rifles and submachine guns, along with the full loads of grenades and ammunition. The weight of weapons that each Spartan could carry was staggering and they had pulled out all the stops. Once it looked like everyone was overloaded and could carry no more, many slung their primary weapons next to their secondary weapons and shouldered Jackhammer rocket launchers.

>
 When John asked Jason what the idea was he replied, "We figured if we were to teleport into a fortified position, say from above, we'd be able to let loose a hell of a barrage of fire with these before jumping out again."

>
 John nodded with approval then noted with amusement that both Kelly and Boxer carried Havoc nuclear mines on their backs. He shook his head but did not try to speculate what they planned to do with them.

>
 Minutes later all the Spartans were ready and fully garbed for war. They split into their two designated groups as the Master Chief stood before them.

>
 "Listen up Spartans. Alpha team and Bravo team will ride down to the surface in two Pelicans each. I will command Alpha, and Jason will command Bravo. Our initial flight path will take us over the temple entrance area, where we will teleport on my signal to the coordinates Cortana will upload to your suits. Our Pelicans will continue on with the first wave of Marine transports until we secure the entrance. Upon Marine forces securing a beachhead in the temple, Alpha and Bravo teams will split into Gold, Green, Red, Blue, Black, and Phantom teams. Phantom being the sniper detail, and the rest of the teams being under command of the designated team leaders. Black team will safeguard the Marine beachhead against Covenant counterattack and respond to any Marine sighting of Brute forces. Gold, Greed, Red, and Blue will enter the temple and actively search and destroy Brute forces in advance of Marine forces securing the temple. Phantom team will provide sniper support for all actions. Understood?"

>
 Every Spartan winked their acknowledgement light at John and he knew they were ready to wage ultimate war.

>
 "Remember one thing Spartans, we are playing for keeps here and there is no prize for second place. When it comes to the Covenant, second place means you're dead. So let's show them we mean business and that Spartans are winners, no matter what the odds. Cover each other and complete the mission. And don't worry about any sort of collateral damage, we're on the Covenant homeworld, and if I had my way, the whole thing would be up in flames. Board your Pelicans."

>
 The large group of Spartans instantly and fluidly split into four smaller groups and entered the ramps of idling Pelicans just as the inner bay doors opened and the bay was flooded with howling Marines all searching for a transport to bring them to the fight.

>
 The shipwide PA came on and a neutral AI voice announced, "Battlestations, battlestations. All combat personnel, to your stations. Security teams, lock down all sectors. Marine invasion forces, prepare to debark the ship. All Longsword and Fury pilots to your ships. Squadrons four through eight and twelve through sixteen are clear to launch at t- minus ten minutes. All non essential personnel, secure for jump."

>
 Master Chief strapped in as the Pelican's door slowly shut, closing him off from the disciplined columns of Marines lining up in front of their own Pelicans. He turned from the blank hatch and looked at his team, strapped in along the interior of the heavy bird. Spartan-324, Jill, was slowly bobbing her head as she clenched and unclenched her fists. John opened a private com to her and asked, "Is there something wrong Jill?"

>
 She turned her head towards him and John saw his own ghostly reflection in her visor. She stopped flexing her hands and swiped a finger across her faceplate, the signal for a smile.

>
 "No sir Master Chief. I was just humming an old nursery rhyme to myself, one my mother used to sing to me before they let me go to the training."

>
 John nodded and wondered to himself. He and his original Spartans had been taken away from their family, literally kidnapped, but apparently it seemed the new generation had been procured in a different manner. It seemed as if the parents had volunteered them. But John pushed these thoughts aside as the dropship pilot came onto his com.

>
 "Good morning Spartans. I am Ensign Frankiewicz, but most people call me Cowboy. I'll be your Pelican puke for today, and I'll try to make sure your ride down to Hell is as comfortable and

enjoyable as any first class flight. Estimated flight time is six minutes from ship to shore as we will be debarking the Hornet will in Covenant airspace. Uh, inside the atmosphere that is. There will be no refreshments served on this flight, and for those of you who care, the in flight movie will be 'The End of the Covenant Race'. Thank you for your time and I hope you have a pleasant flight."

>
 The thirteen Spartans in the troop hold sat motionless, the pilot's humor lost on them. In the cockpit, Frankiewicz shrugged and looked at his instruments, noting with amazement that the thirteen Spartans weighed more than thirty Marines would have. He shook his head and whistled.

>
 "It'll be a miracle we even fly with all that weight aboard."

>
 His copilot chuckled as they made their preflight check and readied the ship for flight. Pelicans throughout the Hornet idled and prepared for launch as elsewhere in the fleet, the invasion began.

>
 The entire UNSC fleet had jumped into Covenant space behind the shadow of Desolation. So named because it was the smallest moon, farthest away from the middle of the system, and the Covenant home world. The Covenant planet, the High Charity, was the only other planet in the system besides the small planetoid that Desolation orbited. The millions of kilometers distance between the two was filled with the bulk of the Covenant fleet. Thousands of warships drifted in the void.

>
 As of yet, the UNSC fleet remained undetected, but it was only a matter of time before they were discovered and the Covenant forces would turn to engage. Admiral Cole surveyed the data that his station provided him and was deeply grateful that they at least had the advantage of surprise. He was not about to waste the initiative and sent the order to begin the invasion.

>
 The eight automated troop carriers at the center of the fleet powered up. Shields and weapons came online, along with the Planetbuster nukes and enhancement fields. The capacitors for the newly improved slipspace generators powered up, and at a predetermined time, discharged, launching the eight ships into the void.

>
 They reappeared a moment later, in a vague circumference around the High Charity. Covenant warships responded with angry vexes on the com and thousands came to bear on the eight human ships. Plasma turrets glowed a dull red, but before a single Covenant ship could fire a shot, the eight troop carriers vanished in the bright blinding flash.

>
 In the chaos that followed, the Covenant High Command would be completely bewildered as half of their fleet simply disappeared. And before any response could be formulated, or any sort of regrouping and damage control could take place, a small fleet of human ships jumped into a newly cleared orbit around the High Charity. Cruisers and destroyers appeared in a high orbit, screening the ships below from attack. A supercarrier and her escorts actually jumped into the atmosphere of the planet, a feat never before witnessed by Covenant eyes.

>
 And as if the sudden, inexplicable appearance of the human ships, and the loss of half of their fleet instantaneously weren't enough to completely baffle the Covenant High Command, the human ships began destroying their remaining warships with ease!

>
 Onboard the space station Hubris, the High Command watched in terror as a human frigate gutted a Covenant carrier and two destroyers with plasma weapons unlike any in the Covenant arsenal. And when a cruiser finally managed to fire at the human ship, the

plasma torpedoes where dispersed by some sort of shield! Human ships with shields and plasma lances!

>
 Shocked captains turned their ships and ran from the devastating firepower of the human fleet. For the first time, Covenant ships had been bested. The survivors of the Covenant fleet accelerated away from the High Charity and these deadly new human ships, to regroup at the edge of the system and launch a counterattack to remove the human scum from their world.

>
 The Hornet and her four destroyer escorts jumped directly into the High Charity atmosphere. Flights of Longswords and Furies streamed out of her launch bays, followed by wings of Skyhawk bombers to strafe ground targets. The Hornet and her escorts fired their plasma weapons at ground side targets, completely scouring Covenant bases and troop positions from the planet's surface.

>
 Isolated groups of Seraph fighters were able to launch from their bases, but were immediately set upon by vengeful Furies and Longswords and most were destroyed. Covenant AAA defenses fired futile barrages of fire at the capital ships above, but merely pecked away at the interlocking shields.

>
 Elsewhere on the planet, the high orbiting human fleet launched devastating salvos of plasma fire, completely annihilating the Covenant troop presence. Finally the Covenant troops understood what it meant to fear death from above.

>
 The Hornet and her escorts settled into a high geo synchronous orbit above the temple, and her entire complement of Pelicans launched for the surface. The four Pelicans bearing the Spartans were among the first to reach the temple, and as the entire formation passed over the entrance, the Spartans appeared groundside in front of the massive door.

>
 The Spartans had appeared inside of a defense point and were among the Covenant soldiers manning the post. A gold elite was still barking orders to a bewildered grunt when a Spartan pistol whipped him from behind, killing him instantly. The fight lasted for about ten seconds and in that time the Spartans killed every Covenant at the post. A grunt fell from a shade, a bullet hole neatly placed in its forehead.

>
 John wiped blue blood from the gauntlet of his armor as Cortana chimed in, "Impressive Chief, you Spartans are really up to par now. I hope you didn't break a sweat, because I'm reading a massive Covenant signal on the other side of this door. Battalion sized at least."

>
 "I copy Cortana. Spartans, high jump maneuver. Anything that explodes. Alpha team first, followed by Bravo two seconds later. Immediately after you fire your ordinance, jump back out to here. Understood?"

>
 Acknowledgement light winked in his HUD. Master Chief pulled two HE grenades from a ring holder on his thigh.

>
 "Cortana, I need some coordinates, twenty meters up, ten meters inside that door for the first team, and same height, thirty meters in for the second team."

>
 "Understood Master Chief. I'm sending everyone their coordinates now."

>
 John saw the numbers scroll and lock in his visor. He pulled the pins on both grenades and said, "JUMP!"

>
 Immediately half the Spartans disappeared, with the other half following two seconds after. Alpha team materialized twenty meters in the air above a horde of Covenant soldiers. Cortana had been right, John guessed about a battalion of mixed Covenant troops. He dropped both grenades, their spoons flying clear and their fuses lighting.

>
Spartans in Alpha team fired rocket launchers and dropped grenades, annihilating whole swathes of Grunts, Jackals, and Elites. As Alpha team fired, Bravo team appeared farther into the tunnel, also launching salvos of rockets and dropping dozens of grenades. A second later, both teams had jumped back to safety on the other side of the door before any of the Covenant soldiers could even fire a shot.

>
 Explosive death and shrapnel rained down on the aliens and they all died, screaming and bellowing in pain. On the other side of the door Cortana reported, "Covenant contact eliminated. Opening the door."

>
 She hacked into the Covenant net and overrode the locking mechanisms for the door. The four segments of the hatch split apart and slid to the sides, revealing a smoke filled room and a floor that was slippery with blood and covered in body parts. The Spartans noted with grim satisfaction the effectiveness of their new tactics and advanced warily into the gore slicked tunnel.

>
 "Chief... I am impressed. Normally it would have taken a group of Spartans this size about twenty minutes to kill or disable a battalion of Covenant troops by my best estimates. Your team has done it in as many seconds."

>
 "Save the praise for later Cortana. Call in the Marines and give me coordinates on likely defense positions within the temple."

>
 "Affirmative Chief. Marines are inbound, ETA two minutes. Accessing Covenant network, accessing temple schematic. Ah, here we go. At the end of this tunnel, it opens up into a large antechamber. I read Covenant forces massing there. But no Brutes. I do have readings on them elsewhere in the temple. Would you like to know where they're likely to be, or where they are?"

>
 "Where they are, if you'd please Cortana."

>
 "Affirmative Chief, I read several groups. Two are at the access tunnels leading to the core of the temple, and three more are in defensive positions around the core of the temple. Would you like jump coordinates to them?"

>
 "Only the first two for now. And not directly among them. Put us in front of them, behind cover."

>
 "Affirmative, uploading coordinates now."

>
 John turned to his Spartans as the first elements of Marines arrived at the door. A Warthog with three Marines and a Jackhammer launcher squealed to a stop at the entrance and squads of Marines deployed to secure the tunnel.

>
 "All teams, we're proceeding as planned. Black team stay here, the rest follow my jump, and we'll take our first look at the Brutes."

>
 Forty four Spartans vanished into thin air and nearby Marines expressed their amazement with choice curses and swears. A Gunnery Sergeant turned to the nearest Spartan and said, "I always knew you weepy mutha fuckas fought like ghosts but damn! You really mean it!"

>
 Blue, Gold, Red, and Green teams reappeared behind several large boxes, that seemed to be made to block the entrance to the tunnel the Brutes were in. The Spartans crouched silently as John snaked a fiber optic probe around the corner of the box. Six Brutes stood at the ready in the tunnel. Two carried the high velocity grenade launchers that had killed Grace, and the other four sported odd looking rifles that were attached to packs on their backs by means of long cables.

>
 "Master Chief, I've analyzed the images of those weapons, and I believe them to be flamethrowers. They should be virtually

ineffective against your shields, but they will still raise the suit temperatures to dangerous levels after prolonged exposure."

>
 "Thank you Cortana, but I don't plan on being exposed for any amount of time while they still have those grenade launchers."

>
 Kelly and Boxer edged up to the Chief. They pulled the batons from their hips and snapped them out but John shook his head.

>
 "Wait, I want to give the snipers a shot at them first. If the first shots don't drop them, then teleport to them and take them out. Linda, I want the ones with the launchers down first. No matter what. Do we have any Jackhammers left?"

>
 "Two Master Chief."

>
 "Then I want those sighted on them now, only fire on my mark."

>
 Linda and her snipers sighted on their targets and fired. Linda dropped one of the grenadiers with a shot to the head, and the other fell with two rounds through its heart. Two other Brutes suffered shots to the chest, but didn't fall, and the last dropped with a round in its eye.

>
 Boxer and Kelly jumped right as the surviving Brutes roared in anger and began to charge the Spartans' position. Kelly appeared to the side of the Brutes and swept her plasma baton low, through the legs of the one nearest her. Boxer appeared on the other side and took the head off another Brute. The two remaining Brutes raised their flamethrowers and launched tongues of fire at the hidden Spartans before being attacked from behind by Boxer and Kelly. A moment later and it was done, the six Brutes dead with no Spartan casualties.

>
 At the entrance to the temple, Sgt. Johnson stood watching his Marines progress into the tunnel. Squads of Marines stood guard as hundreds of others proceeded further and further into the interior. Scorpion tanks and Warthogs mounting a plethora of weapons accompanied the assault inwards as several stood guard outside the entrance, protecting the newly arrived Marines as they entered the temple.

>
 There was little need for the guard Warthogs as UNSC ships and fighters controlled the atmosphere. Covenant hulks littered the ground, all that remained of the Banshee and Seraph forces that had been on planet at the time of the invasion. The earth that had been dark and foreboding before, was now pocked with craters and bodies of the slain.

>
 The advance elements of the 3rd Marine division were approaching the antechamber in the middle of the temple, and warning signals went off inside Johnson's head. On the other side of the inner doors, legions of Covenant sat waiting behind fortifications, shields, Wraith tanks, and Shade plasma turrets. Every Covenant weapon that could be brought to bear was aimed at the doors cutting the tunnel entry. With no other entrance to the inner temple, the door was a sure death trap for any Marine or vehicle that tried to enter through it.

>
 "Hold up! Everyone freeze!"

>
 The procession of Marines immediately froze in their tracks, many looking at the Sergeant as he stood atop a Warthog. Johnson opened a com line to his CO Captain Gregory he hopped off the vehicle and strode toward the doors.

>
 "Captain, I have a bad feeling about these doors. There's no way the Covies are going to just let us walk in and take this place down. My gut tells me they got every sort of heavy artillery pointed at this door just waitin to take us out when we go through."

>
 "I read you Sergeant. I was about to say the same thing. What

kind of intel do we have on what is inside that chamber?"

>
 "Cortana told us that it was most likely the most defensible position in the entire temple, there's only one way in. If there are any Covies in there, and there sure as hell are, they'll pot shoot whatever we can fit in that door without us even getting to fire back."

>
 "I understand Sergeant. I'll talk to Black team leader and see if we can get some assistance in here."

>
 The Captain used him com again and opened a channel to Petty Officer Lee.

>
 "Petty Officer, this is Captain Gregory. We're stuck in a bottleneck here, and we need a little distraction so we can breach these doors and have an icecube's chance in hell of storming the chamber. I've got a feeling that the other side of these doors is hell waiting to happen, and we won't be able to open them without getting smoked. Can you help us out?"

>
 "I copy you Captain. We will jump into the chamber to catch the Covenant off guard and hopefully turn their attention away from the doors. Mass your armor here and prepare to storm the chamber once I give you the signal to blow the doors."

>
 "Outstanding Spartan. You there! Get those Scorpions up here now! I want four abreast and rocket Warthogs behind them. We're going to blow the doors and form a defensive circle on the inside."

>
 "What's the situation Captain?"

>
 "Black team Spartans are going to jump inside to give us a chance to blow the doors and enter. Form the breaching team now, I want our armor massed here, with A company to support them."

>
 "Aye sir. Alpha company! You're the tip of the spear. Spread your platoons through the gap and secure the perimeter of the circle. All other companies will follow."

>
 Captain Gregory watched the Sergeant order the troops then reported to General Davis, commander of the Marine assault force. The entirety of the 3rd Marine division was groundside now, either at the entrance to the temple or inside the long entry tunnel. The 8th division was securing a perimeter around the temple, so no Covenant could escape, and no counterattack would threaten the invasion.

>
 Elsewhere on the planet, the 57th ODST division was busy scouring the planet's surface for secret installations and troop concentrations. They performed hunter killer missions throughout the geography of the planet, ensuring that no viable ground force remained on the planet that could throw the Marines off the surface.

>
 And the 32nd division remained onboard the Hornet as a floating reserve. The High Charity seemed to be firmly in control of the human assault force, but the Covenant High Command had other plans in mind.

>
 Aboard the Hubris, Covenant commanders regrouped their fleets and planned a counterattack to dislodge the human invaders from their planet. The eight hundred remaining Covenant ships formed a screen between the Hubris and the High Charity, hoping to discourage any human ships from engaging the station.

>
 The Covenant had learned from their previous assaults and had spread their ships wide to avoid being bunched, easy targets. Dropships and carriers loaded with Covenant soldiers in the effort to retake the High Charity. Angry Elites bellowed orders at Grunts and Jackals to get moving.

>
 In a busy bay on the Hubris Covenant troops ran left and right to get to where they needed to go. Weapons were distributed and groups of Elites stood together, checking armor and inciting each

other into fits of beserker rage.

>
 Suddenly a set of doors that had been given a wide berth by the Covenant soldiers opened, and bright iridescent light poured out. Indistinct shadows stood within and every soldier in the bay froze.

>
 The shadows within stepped forward and out of the blinding glow. They materialized into hard, armored forms, the forms of Brutes. The group numbered around twenty, and their armor seemed reminiscent of the Elites', but was much more advanced. Some carried the grenade launchers and flamethrowers of their planetary counterparts, but most carried some other type of rifle.

>
 The armored Brutes strode forward into the mass of soldiers and began batting unfortunate troopers aside. A gold armored Elite was slow to move from the path of the group, and an angry Brute smashed it's head, tossing the limp body to the side. The scene repeated itself several more times as the Brutes made their way to a slim, needle like shuttle.

>
 The Covenant troops finished loading their ships and once the bay was cleared, the docking doors opened, venting the bay to space. The needle shuttle was the first to exit the bay and move into space. Once the shuttle cleared the station, a cloaking device enveloped it, and it disappeared from view.

>
 Shuttles and ships streamed from the Hubris and joined the waiting fleet, all oriented toward the planet. The Covenant had learned from their previous mistakes and had spread their ships out, not wanting to be caught in a bunch. But they had failed to take to heart the full advancements of the human ships. Just as the Covenant ships had begun to get underway towards the High Charity, the human fleet appeared in their midst.

>
 The Battlecruisers Atlantis, Titan, and Impervious jumped into normal space around the Hubris, and the instant they came out of Slipspace, their plasma lances discharged at the station. A hundred beams of plasma blasted through the station's shielding and ripped through its hull with ease.

>
 Holed in dozens of places, the Hubris began to vent explosive gases and list to the side amidst massive sheets of armor that had been cut away by the fearsome weapons of the human fleet. The rest of the Covenant fleet fared no better as scores were instantly destroyed by the initial volley of fire.

>
 And before the Covenant ships could even charge their weapons to fire a first salvo, the human ships unleashed a second volley of fire into the Covenant fleet. Scores more of Covenant ships dissolved under the torrent of plasma lances and the Covenant counterattack faltered.

>
 The UNSC fleet persisted in destroying the Covenant ships, the advantage clearly in their favor. Already the Covenant space station began coming apart under its own rotation and hundreds of Covenant ships floated uselessly through deep space.

>
 Onboard the UNSC Frigate Guadalcanal, Captain David Richards watched intently through his bridge screens as the battle took place. His crew operated with efficiency and prowess, most were veterans of combat against the Covenant, which was extremely rare in the UNSC fleet.

>
 "Helm, come about fifty six degrees. Bring out bow to bear on that carrier there. Weapons, I want forward lance batteries to target her power core."

>
 "Aye aye sir, forward batteries acquiring target."

>
 "Captain, I have a destroyer bearing down on us on the port side. She's warming plasma turrets, preparing to fire."

>
 "Weapons, port broadside batteries acquire target. Hole her

from stem to stern. Bring up dispersion shields on the port side. Helm, to flank speed."

>
 "Aye aye sir, portside broadside batteries have acquired target. Forward batteries have acquired target, waiting for order to fire."

>
 "Thank you Mr. Makota. You may fire."

>
 "Captain! The destroyer is firing! Two plasma torpedoes inbound on the port side, impact in twenty seconds!"

>
 "Helm, after we fire, fire our underside emergency thrusters. See if we can't avoid being hit."

>
 "Aye sir, waiting for firing."

>
 "All targeted batteries firing now Captain."

>
 The unbearably bright lances of plasma shot forward from the prow and broadside batteries of the frigate. The prow lances impacted amidships on the Covenant carrier and instantly pierced the shields and hull. An instant after, the ships engines died and it's plasma turrets lost their red glow. It drifted dead in space and became a helpless victim to the swarms of fighters and bombers launching from the nearby Eisenhower II.

>
 The broadside lances of the Guadalcanal smashed through destroyers shields and completely cored the Covenant ship. A neat hole was punched through the center of the ship and it was an empty hull that continued through space on it's inertia. It would have collided with the Guadalcanal had the frigate not accelerated out of the way.

>
 "Captain! Five seconds to impact!"

>
 "Fire thrusters now Ms. Ramirez!"

>
 Midshipman First Class Tracy Ramirez triggered the thruster control on her station, launching the Guadalcanal out of the path of the torpedoes. But the moment the Covenant ship was destroyed, the plasma lost its form and quickly dispersed into space.

>
 The Captain smiled and brought up information on his console. He called up his ship's AI and queried her about more potential targets.

>
 "Sylvia, what is the nearest Covenant ship to us now?"

>
 "Captain, the nearest Covenant ship is the Righteous Victory, approximately sixty kilometers off our starboard side."

>
 "What is her class and displacement?"

>
 "The Righteous Victory is a heavy cruiser. She displaces a hundred thousand tons."

>
 "Helm, bring us about. I want the prow batteries to bear on that cruiser."

>
 "Aye aye sir. Coming about to one oh eight degrees."

>
 The AI began to have bright data figures stream over her form and she turned to face the Captain.

>
 "Captain, I'm receiving a call for assistance from the Lexington. It seems she is tracking some sort of a phantom signal moving away from the battle. They can't get a fix on the signal, so they want us to help triangulate with the Henderson to help lock it down."

>
 "Thank you Sylvia. Helm bring us about again. Coordinate with the Lexington and Henderson so we can get into position. Weapons, I want all batteries prepared to fire, and make sure all shields are operating at one hundred percent."

>
 The Guadalcanal turned away from the battle and joined her sister ships in the search for the phantom contact. The three frigates headed toward the planet in a triangular formation searching the void with their sensors, vainly trying to pinpoint the location of the Covenant stealth shuttle.

>
 On the Covenant shuttle, the armored Brutes watched with

anticipation as they neared the High Charity. The human supercarrier and her escorts remained in high orbit above the planet, but were easily avoided by the shuttle. And the three searching frigates were too far behind to pose a threat.

>
 Captain Richards looked on passively as his ship continued in formation with her sister ships. They had been moving steadily closer to the planet, but had been unable to locate the Covenant ghost.

>
 "Radar, any new contacts?"

>
 A young red headed female answered from her station without looking up.

>
 "No Captain. Neither the Lexington nor the Henderson report any contacts either. And we are nearing the planets atmosphere."

>
 "Very well. Thank you Ms. Murphy. Communications, open me a link to the Hornet. Get my Admiral Cole."

>
 "Aye sir, com link opened to Admiral Cole sir."

>
 "Yes Richards, what is it?"

>
 "Sir, we have been tracking a Covenant signal to the planet with the Lexington and Henderson. We haven't been able to pinpoint it and believe it may be planetside now, or in the process of making planetfall."

>
 "Very well, thanks for the update. You may return to the battle, we'll take care of it from here."

>
 "Aye sir."

>
 "Communications, contact the Lexington and Henderson, tell their captains that we are disengaging from the search and returning to the battle. Weapons, give me a max range lock on the nearest enemy ship in range. Make sure our line of fire is clear and that we wont hit another UNSC vessel."

>
 "Aye sir. Max range affirmative."

>
 The three frigates wheeled and sped back to the battle, but there was little need. The last of the Covenant warships were being disabled and boarded by UNSC Marines, their crews imprisoned and systems analyzed.

>
 Onboard the Hornet Admiral Cole ordered flights of Furies launched to locate and destroy the Covenant stealth ship.

>
 "Send the Furies to lockdown the airspace around the temple. That's where this ship must be going."

>
 "Aye sir, directing the Furies now."

>
 Lieutenant John Dunbar rolled his Fury fighter to starboard as his com crackled to life.

>
 "Devil One Niner, bring your flight to sector thirty two. Keep your eyes peeled for a phantom contact. Your orders are to seek out and destroy the contact upon discovery."

>
 "Affirmative flight, Devil flight to sector thirty two."

>
 Dunbar flipped switches and toggles on his console. Targeting systems and munitions rosters came online his HUD and he began scanning for a phantom. Several minutes passed before his radar briefly bleeped and the contact was gone.

>
 "Devil Two Zero, I just got a reading on the ghost. Did you see anything?"

>
 "One Niner, I copy your reading. It disappeared again, but it was about three o'clock off the starboard side."

>
 "Affirmative, let's go hunting."

>
 Dunbar flipped the Master Arm switch and armed his Tiger medium range Air to Air missiles. He looked up just in time to see lasers blast out from nowhere to shear his wingman's Fury in half. He rolled his Fury to port to avoid the sweeping lasers and immediately locked on the source.

>
 Once the Fury righted itself, Dunbar pickled off two missiles in rapid succession, hoping to catch the Covenant ship off guard. The missiles streaked ahead towards the still invisible ship, and exploded, disabling the cloaking system.

>
 The shuttle reappeared two kilometers in front of the Fury and was streaking towards the temple. Dunbar pushed his Fury's engines out in pursuit while simultaneously opening a com to the Hornet.

>
 "Flight, this is Devil One Niner, I've got your phantom contact. It's some bizarre Covie shuttle, like a needle. Devil Two Zero is down, I never saw him punch out, don't think he got the chance, but I suggest launching rescue immediately. I'm in pursuit of the shuttle and will engage to destroy."

>
 "Copy One Niner, dispatching rescue Pelicans to Two Zero's coordinates."

>
 Dunbar continued his pursuit of the shuttle, but could not seem to catch up to it. In fact, the Covenant ship seemed to be pulling away. He was shocked, the Fury was the fastest single ship in the UNSC fleet. But he continued his pursuit anyway and locked his remaining missiles onto the shuttle. But it was clear enough to Dunbar that the shuttle would get to the temple before he could destroy it.

>
 Onboard the Covenant shuttle, the armored Brutes attached jetpacks and prepared to jump. The bay doors opened as the shuttle neared the temple. It continued at flank speed, never intending to stop. Seconds passed and a green light went on in the cargo bay. The Brutes immediately moved to the bay doors and jumped, freefalling above the temple.

>
 Dunbar finally closed the distance and was coming in from above the shuttle, a perfect kill shot. He never noticed the dark forms falling from the shuttle as he launched his missiles.

>
 "Goodbye..."

>
 The missiles streaked forward as the shuttle pulled up from its descent. They exploded above the ship and the explosion tore through the hull. The ship's pilots were immediately killed and the entire shuttle came apart a moment later. Flaming debris rained down from above, distracting the Marines below, and camouflaging the falling Brutes.

>
 "For you Two Zero. Flight, splash one bandit. Devil One Niner returning to ship."

>
 The Fury banked and accelerated through the clouds. Below, bewildered Marines watched the falling debris for a moment longer before returning to their duties. Unbeknownst to them, armored Brutes were among the debris, and closing the distance with every passing second.

>
 Zyryal, the Brute commander, grunted in satisfaction as he saw the Marines below remain ignorant of their approach. The insertion had worked better than he had hoped, the humans' own fightercraft providing a perfect cover for his force. One hundred meters above the humans, he briefly fired his thruster pack to slow his descent as his team followed suit.

>
 Again, at fifty meters the Brutes fired their thrusters again to further slow their descent. By then they were traveling at a mere thirty meters a second, well within the survivability limits of Brutes in armor. Two seconds later, they smashed into unaware Marines, killing them instantly.

>
 Corporal Chris Wier was standing over watch with his squad and a couple of Warthogs on the side of the temple. They were about to be relieved when all hell broke loose. A dark armored form dropped onto Private Delson's head. His shield flashed for a brief second, before

disappearing and the form crushed Delson beneath its weight.

>
 Four other Marines died the same way before the Brutes were suddenly among them. Wier had time to fire three rounds and give a shout of alarm before a Brute smashed a rifle butt into his face, crushing his skull. In seconds, the ten Marines of the squad were all dead, pools of blood forming around their broken bodies.

>
 The relief squad approached in a troop carrier Warthog, and before they knew any better, the transport was annihilated by a score of high velocity grenades. Once the immediate perimeter was secure, Zyryal nodded his satisfaction to his team.

>
 The Brutes immediately engaged their thruster packs again began jumping around the side of the temple. They encountered limited resistance by isolated Marine squads, which proved to be mediocre at best. Zyryal shivered in anticipation of facing the legendary super soldiers the humans employed. The Brutes continued on their way, slaughtering Marines whenever they came across them.

>
 Sergeant Johnson received a report of some landing force of Covenant soldiers, ones nobody had ever seen before and were tearing Marines apart. His Marines. He immediately shouldered his rifle and pulled a shotgun from the back of a Warthog.

>
 "Captain! Something wicked this way comes, and while we wait for Black team, I'd say I'm your man to deal with it."

>
 Captain Gregory looked up from a schematic he had been analyzing and nodded. He glanced at his watch before motioning to a Lieutenant next to him.

>
 "Sergeant, take 1st platoon. Lieutenant Downy will stay with me, and hurry Sergeant, the breach will occur anytime now."

>
 "Yes sir, I'm on it. 1st platoon! With me, we're gonna go get some!"

>
 Zyryal stood atop a Scorpion tank, the crew of which he had just slaughtered. His team stood scattered around the entrance, waiting for the elite warriors who were sure to come, and the battle that would ensue.

>
 Surely enough, Black team responded to the desperate calls for help, knowing that it had been Brutes that were inflicting such casualties. Jason did not know that the Brutes outnumbered him almost three to one, but he did know that whatever the scenario, his team would hold the advantage.

>
 Zyryal was growing impatient and about to order an advance into the entrance when suddenly Black team Spartans were among his team. The black armored warriors suddenly materialized amidst his team, lashing out with hand and foot, striking Brutes with ease. Two Spartans had jumped to flank Zyryal, not knowing he was the commander of the Brutes, and dislodged him from the tank with vicious kicks to his back.

>
 He sprawled on the ground, growling with intense anger at being caught off guard. He whirled and aimed his rifle where the Spartans had been, only to find them gone, the space empty. The Brute quickly stood up and took stock of his team.

>
 Two Brutes lay motionless on the ground, bizarre plasma wounds crossing critical parts of their anatomy. But the rest of his team remained upright and no more scarred than some dents in their armor. He knew instantly from the brief contact that his team outnumbered the Spartans by more than two to one, and so he pressed the engagement. His team had barely reengaged their thrusters when the Spartans were amongst them again.

>
 The Spartans reappeared as before, lashing out with hand and foot, as well as glowing batons, hitting Brutes left and right. But this time, the Brutes were prepared and fought back. A Spartan was smashed into the ground as three Brutes grabbed a hold of him when he

jumped and threw him down. His shields flashed and disappeared as he was momentarily stunned by the impact.

>
 That moment was more than the Brutes needed and three laser beams lanced down and cut the Spartan in half. Mark's vital signs flatlined in Jason's visor and he briefly glanced over and saw the body on the ground. Another of his team's vitals went flat as a Brute grabbed a hold of Jill's helmet from behind and twisted sharply, snapping her unbreakable bones and nearly tearing her head off her shoulders.

>
 Zyryal let the limp form of the Spartan drop to the ground and searched for more targets. All over his team was destroying the Spartan force, their numbers already dwindling. Without warning a black armored form appeared directly in front of Zyryal and smashed his chin with a thunderous uppercut.

>
 He stumbled back, recoiling from the blow but noting with satisfaction that this Spartan did not disappear again, but rather pressed the attack. A glowing baton snapped out from the Spartan's hand and he went after Zyryal with whirling attacks and blows, most of which Zyryal barely avoided or countered.

>
 Jason attacked the Brute who had killed Jill with a ferocity he had never felt before. His anger burned within him, growing hotter and hotter with every passing second. His peripheral vision blurred and he only saw his target, the Brute before him. In his fury he failed to notice that half of his team's vitals were flat and the monotonous tone in his helmet.

>
 Zyryal jetted backwards, desperately trying to put space between this berserk Spartan and himself, but was thwarted by the Spartan's ability to jump through space faster than he could jet. Every instant he thought he might get a moments respite, the Spartan was there, with the deadly plasma baton whirling, a constant dervish of doom.

>
 Five Spartans remained fighting, and the Brutes put forth their best efforts to eliminate the survivors. The Spartans remained alive only because of their proficiency with teleporting, avoiding the attacks and reach of the Brutes as they chased after them. But it was only a matter of time before the Brutes would catch up to the Spartans and put an end to Black team.

>
 Sergeant Johnson and 1st platoon ran urgently against the flow of Marines in the tunnel. It had taken them close to fifteen minutes to cover the four hundred meter distance in the cramped conditions, but they were finally at the entrance to the temple. Johnson stopped and faced his on loan platoon and barked out.

>
 "Awright Marines! Those supersoldiers need a hand for a change, and it's about damned time the Marines repayed the favor! I want these damned Covies smashed! Leave nothing alive!"

>
 1st platoon roared a fierce battlecry and charged out of the tunnel. The Brutes were vainly attempting to corral the Spartans when a large force of Marines suddenly rushed out of the temple. A sabot round from a sniper rifle tore through Zyryal's shoulder, spinning him from his feet. His sudden incapacitation was all Jason needed to drive his baton through the Brute's helmet, destroying his brain.

>
 Sergeant Johnson racked the slide on his shotgun, pumping a round into the chamber before blasting a Brute off it's feet. He and three other Marines fired on the downed warrior until it was a pulpy, blue and purple mass on the stone floor. Another Marine peppered a Brute with his assault rifle, distracting it enough to allow a Spartan to empty his submachine gun into the back of the Brute's head.

>
 The sudden arrival of the Marines tipped the favor of the

battle in the human's favor, and now the Brutes were on the defense. Lasers crisscrossed the battle, cutting Marines in half, while grenades blew shields and armor away. But the Marines held the numerical advantage and were pressing the Brutes back, farther away from the entrance.

>
 Johnson's shotgun locked empty and he dropped it and shouldered his rifle. The Spartan he had seen on the bridge with the Master Chief was wrestling with a Brute and looked to be dangerously close being overwhelmed. The Brute had managed to wrestle away the Spartan's plasma baton and was pressing it closer and closer to his neck.

>
 Johnson jammed the muzzle of his rifle into the hip joint of the Brute's armor and fired a burst, severing the spinal cord. The Brute threw it's head up in pain and Jason slammed its neck with his fist. The Covenant warrior fell backwards, a gurgling sound issuing from its broken throat. As it hit the ground, the body began to spasm. Johnson leveled his rifle and spattered the Brute's brain matter all over the stone.

>
 "I told you to count on the Marines, and I live by my word Petty Officer."

>
 Johnson offered the Spartan a hand up which he graciously accepted.

>
 "Thank you Sergeant, the Marines have indeed saved my team and I am grateful."

>
 Five Brutes remained standing in a defensive circle, completely surrounded by the Marines and Spartans when sniper fire issued from the pinnacle of the temple. Sabot rounds tore through the air, leaving ion trails in the atmosphere as they impacted on their targets. Brutes spun and recoiled, smashed back from the rounds. And seconds later it was over, all the Brutes lying dead on the ground.

>
 "Thank you Phantom team, you're intervention is much appreciated."

>
 "Affirmative Black leader, any time."

>
 Jason looked sadly at the bodies of the fallen around him. Fully half of his team had been wiped out by the Brutes, and that was a price he had not been prepared to pay. Feelings and emotions he had never felt before welled up within him. His life had been spent as the best of the best, and he was ill equipped to deal with a situation in which he and his team had come out second best.

>
 Questions about his judgment and leadership formed in his mind, repeating over and over again, hounding his conscience. He brewed as he knelt by Jill's motionless form, her hand in his own gauntleted palm. His self admonishments grew to the bursting point when a com patched through.

>
 "Petty Officer, we're going to assault the antechamber. Get your team up and ready to go and report to the entrance. I'll brief you from there."

>
 "Master Chief, I... I don't think I should be in charge of Black team right now, I... I made a mistake..."

>
 "Spartan, get your hat on right. I need everyone of my team operation at one hundred and ten percent right now, and you're my second in command. We all make mistakes, but it's how we deal with them that counts. Now get Black team to the entrance."

>
 "Aye aye Master Chief."

>
 Jason stood and squared his shoulders. Covenant warriors were calling for the company of death, and he was not going to keep them waiting any longer.

3. Chapter III: Awakening

Chapter III: Awakening

The Marines and Spartans completed their mopping up action and began policing the dead. Four Spartans were KIA and another was suffering from a malfunctioning helmet, compliments of a Brute's soft touch. Jason approached Chris to assess the damage.

"How's your hat Chris?"

The Spartan looked at Jason bareheaded and scowled. He held the helmet in his hand and was inspecting it closely, but it was readily apparent to even the casual observer there was severe damage. The visor had been cracked by a vicious blow and a spider web of splits covered the majority of the material. The right side of the helmet was partially slagged by the Brute's laser rifle and it was clear that the suit would not seal properly anymore.

"I think this one's done Jason. The HUD is all screwed up and I can't get it to seal right anymore. I don't think I'll be able to jump anymore without access to the navigational systems."

"We'll send for a replacement from the Hornet. The next shuttle should be able to bring you one down. In the meantime, stay out here and help re-secure the perimeter of the temple. Those Brutes did a number on the sentries."

"Aye aye sir. Once I get my hat back, may I report back to the team?"

"Affirmative Chris, send me an acknowledgement wink once you're ready, and we'll send our coordinates."

Jason clapped his fellow Spartan on the shoulder before hearing Victoria chime in his helmet.

"Stand fast Petty Officer, his helmet will repair itself to a certain degree. Just sit tight and watch."

Jason and Chris watched in bewilderment as before their eyes, the material of his helmet began to re-knit itself. The hard composite of the helmet began to melt as if scalded by acid, but in reverse. The damage seemed to fill in on itself and re-expand on its own. Slowly at first, but faster as the process continued, the helmet repaired itself. First the crushed in side, then the mangled locking rings. After several minutes, the helmet was back in working order, albeit scarred and with slightly irregular angles.

"Amazing, this must be the Flood influence on the armor. What happened Victoria?"

"The alloy in your armor has been imbued with certain memory characteristics. In other words, it's a smart metal that will return to its shape after being bent or deformed. We used the design for Flood infection cells to create a sort of symbiotic phage in the armor, which use the structures of intact atoms to repair damaged or converted ones."

The visor was next, and the opaque material seemed to turn to liquid

before reforming sans the spider web of cracks. Jason and Chris were still marveling at the armor when the Master Chief contacted them on the net.

"Petty Officer, we are preparing to assault the antechamber. We need your team to assist because Cortana gave me dimensions on this chamber, and it is absolutely massive. Report to the entry door and we'll give you your team's assignment there."

"Aye Chief, we're on our way."

Jason turned to his remaining four operational Spartans and slapped a new magazine into his rifle. They followed suit, reloading weapons as he racked the charging handle and chambered a round.

"Black team, we're going to assault the antechamber. Jump to the entry doors and await assignment."

The five Black team Spartans disappeared from sight, leaving the Marine squad the Sergeant Johnson had detailed on security outside, while Johnson and 1st platoon rushed to return to their breaching position.

High above the planet, the Hornet continued launching and retrieving flights of fighters and bombers in support of the Marines on the surface. The latest arrivals were a flight of Skyhawks returning from a bombing run on a suspected Covenant position within a canyon. Because of the volume of incoming and outgoing flights, the control tower had issued an order leaving the active bay doors open.

There were several reasons for this, one it being impractical to open and shut the massive doors after every launch or retrieval, and another being that the Covenant air force was thought to be neutralized. This was the first mistake the fleet had made.

A needle shuttle, an exact duplicate of the first Brute bearing shuttle, circled the Hornet and her escorts. It's cloak rendered it invisible to the ships' sensors and for all intents and purposes immune to their weapons, short of a nuclear detonation.

With so many open launch bays to choose from, the shuttle's pilots took their time selecting a bay that was not nearly as busy as the main launch areas. One bay launched a pair of Longswords before becoming dormant, the only activity inside consisted of a few technicians in pressure suits running maintenance on an interceptor.

The shuttle darted forward and entered the bay undetected, even by the techs within who were shielded from outside stimulus by their suits. Only when the armored Brutes were upon them did the humans have the slightest inkling that something was wrong. And by then it was far too late.

Boson's Mate First Class Carlos Delgado sat in the control tower of the Hornet, monitoring the various flight operations of the ship. The term control tower was misleading; a hold over from aircraft carriers of old earth's wet navies. He actually sat in a control room within the Hornet, within the main launch bays. Here he could visually supervise the majority of operations on the ship, and his console gave him the ability to remotely monitor the rest. He was going

through a flight list, of scheduled launches and retrievals when and emergency call came through the aviation net.

"Hornet control, Hornet control, this is Saber Oh Four. I have experienced mechanical malfunctions and I am bingo fuel. Repeat I am bingo fuel and requesting emergency clearance to land."

"Saber Oh Four, this is Hornet control, I read you. We have an empty bay for you, come to heading zero four niner, I repeat zero four niner. I will dispatch emergency teams to that location to greet you on your arrival."

"Affirmative Hornet control. Zero four niner. Thanks much for the direction and room gentlemen. Saber Oh Four out."

Carlos switched his viewing screen to target the incoming craft and he saw Saber Oh Four approaching the ship on an emergency landing vector. Then he switched the screen to the bay that he had just sent Oh Four to and saw it deserted. He knew that some techs were supposed to be running diagnostics and maintenance on a Longsword in there, but he assumed that they had finished already.

He examined the screen a little closer and saw what seemed to be oil stains, or puddles of hydraulic fluid on the deck near the interceptor. He sighed and shook his head as he mentally cursed the lazy techs who had made a mess but not bothered to clean it up.

"Attention, emergency and rescue teams report to Bay Thirty-Eight. Report to Bay Three Eight. We have a Fury that is bingo fuel coming in hot, and there is mechanical damage to the craft. Medical teams on standby."

Carlos hummed and smiled to himself, another small disaster averted. He congratulated himself on his calm, professional handling of the incident, and then turned his attention to more pressing matters around the launch bay like getting some grease monkeys off their tails and back to work.

Ensign Richter gently eased his Longsword towards the safe haven of the Hornet. Shrill alarms sounded in the cockpit as his damaged craft struggled to make it back to the carrier. Guiding recticles appeared on his HUD, guiding him into his landing bay. The deck was cleared but the precaution was unnecessary as Richter deftly landed the interceptor in the center of the landing pad with ease.

"Piece of cake. Flight, this is Saber Oh Four, I have landed in Bay Three Eight and am shutting down. Clear for maintenance crews to approach the Longsword."

"Roger that Oh Four, nice to have you safely back onboard. Crews are on station and we'll have you up and flying in no time at all."

"Thanks much Flight, Oh Four out."

The Ensign removed his flight helmet as the inner bay doors opened and a crew of mechanics appeared, smiling and waving at him. He jauntily returned their salutes as his canopy hissed open, white gas escaping from vent systems along the rim of the cockpit. His crew

chief, Chief Delouise, attached the ladder to the side of the craft for Richter to debark.

"Nice to have you back sir, what was the problem?"

"Couldn't tell you Chief, I was flying along, just dandy, when all a sudden the Master Alarm went off and I started losing fuel. The bird looked fine in the preflight, so I have no idea what went wrong."

"Well sir, you're right, I checked this damn thing myself twice before you did, and all systems were operating at maximum efficiency, and she was in tip top shape. I don't know what could have happened sir, but you have my word that it will be fixed and this incident will never repeat itself."

"Thanks Chief, I know I can count on you."

Richter smiled at the Chief, who was standing at the base of the ladder, as he began to climb down from the cockpit. But before he reached the deck, a guttural howl filled the bay. Richter looked to the far side of the bay where dark armored forms had materialized before his very eyes.

"What in the hell?"

Before he or any of the techs could respond, the bay was crisscrossed with deadly blue lasers, scissoring men in half, burning through flesh and bone with ease. Chief Delouise threw Richter from the ladder just as a bright beam swept through his torso. Richter slammed into the deck as the Chief's topside separated from his bottom and both toppled to the floor.

"Son of bitch! Security! We have hostiles in Bay Three Eight! I repeat there are hostile boarders in Bay Three Eight. Enemy strength is at least..."

A laser cut through the Ensign's head, neatly severing his scalp and top of the brain. His lifeless body slumped to the floor, his pistol discharging into the deck. The Brutes spread through the bay, killing all the remaining technicians as well as the medical team that had arrived to check Ensign Richter.

A squad of the Hornet's Marines approached through the hallways, securing bulkheads one after another in conjunction with another security team. Power had been cut to this section of the ship and only red emergency lights lit the corridors. Powerful lights attached to the Marines' weapons and helmets swept the darkness, probing each shadow for possible targets.

Corporal Williams led his team closer and closer still to the compromised bay. Reports had indicated enemy forces onboard, but had been cut off before an estimate to enemy numbers could be made. Red team, William's team's counterpart, was currently sealing bulkheads approaching the bay.

Private Mobutu was on point, and had just entered another section when a roar echoed down the corridor. The Marines froze and all weapons centered on the next vacant doorway, lights wavering crazily then all focusing on one point. They hugged the walls, trying to

minimize their target profiles while adequately covering the engagement zone.

A single armored figure appeared in the hallway, dark and menacing. Another growl issued from the Brute as it raised its laser rifle and prepared to fire. The Marines responded at once, firing a devastating salvo at the exposed Brute. Rifle rounds tore into its armor, and shotgun shells pounded it backwards. The Brute literally dissolved under the sheer firepower, its innards plastering the bulkhead behind it.

The Marines ceased fire, but as the din ceased, two more Brutes swung into the hallway. Their lasers flashed and Private Mobutu and another Lance Corporal fell slain. The team ducked back into doorways to avoid the lasers as more creased the frames, slagging metal wherever they touched.

Blue team Marines engaged the Brutes in a desperate firefight, attempting to hold them from progressing any farther into the ship. Red team Marines were similarly engaged, and were similarly being destroyed.

Corporal Williams peered down the hallway and fired a burst from his rifle, hoping to keep the Brutes pinned down. But the situation was dire, and it was the Brutes that had the Marines pinned down. A laser flashed and creased William's arm, flashing across his shielding. The charge bar on his HUD drained to a quarter and the heat transferred to his clothing. He jumped back, swatting at his BDU but not actually making contact through the shield.

He grimaced as he saw the red mark on his bicep and realized that the burn would leave a nasty scar. Across the hall, his surviving Marines fired sporadically waiting for reinforcements, and a chance to throw the Brutes off the ship.

Within the depths of the Hornet, in a secret, sealed off chamber, a deadly force was being awakened. Cryogenic chambers hissed and opened, curly wisps of frigid fog escaping and hovering over the grated floor. The chamber was sparsely lit, hardly enough illumination to provide a proper look at the contents of the sleep boxes.

A heavy booted footfall sounded and echoed through the darkness. And another. And a dozen more after that. The footfalls moved through the darkness and covered before the exit door. No visions accompanied the sounds, a fact that could be attributed to the lack of lighting, but was due to something else. A disembodied voice thundered through the hold.

"Welcome back Marines. It's been a long time. Our services and accomplishments have always been over shadowed by the ONI freaks and their sterling combat record, but all that is about to change. They've met their equals and have taken casualties, and now it's our time to shine. We will re-secure the ship and show once and for all that the Marines are the best of the best."

Not a sound could be heard. Nothing moved throughout the chamber. The doors opened and light poured into the darkness, revealing nothing. Minutes later, the doors shut again, enclosing the sleep chambers in darkness once more.

In his private briefing room, Colonel Ackerson smiled contentedly to himself. Finally he would show Doctor Halsey, wherever she was, that her freak show was second best. He tapped controls on his console and began to finalize his plans.

On the planet, the Master Chief rallied his Spartans in front of the antechamber doors. He had been saddened to hear that half of Black team was KIA, but casualties were a fact of war. As hard as you tried to avoid them, they were virtually unavoidable. Jason had taken the casualties hard, privately asking the Chief to be relieved of team command, but John had refused. He was a young Spartan, and had to come to terms with the fact that mistakes will be made, and while he must take responsibility for his actions, the difficulty will be mainly with himself.

John remembered how hard it had been to leave Sam behind on that very first mission, so very long ago. He remembered the turmoil he felt inside, and how he felt to leave one of his own teammates to die. Jason would too eventually realize that sacrifices would have to be made to win the war, he only need wait.

The Spartans had been assembled to assault the antechamber when a distress call came from the Hornet.

"Master Chief, we're in trouble up here. Somehow a Covenant shuttle with Brutes aboard managed to get into one of our bays. The Brutes are rampaging and killing, pushing our Marines back. We can't stop them. We've barely got them contained on Deck 8, but I don't know how much longer that will last. We need your team onboard now to repel them, before they take the ship."

"Aye aye Admiral. I will be aboard presently with a team to deal with the boarders."

John turned to his Spartans and addressed them once again.

"Blue team, with me. We are jumping back to the Hornet to deal with a Brute boarding party. They somehow managed to get aboard and are pushing through the Marine security detail. Jason, you will lead the remaining teams in assaulting the chamber. I'll leave the tactical decisions up to you. Let's move out."

Master Chief and Blue team disappeared, leaving Jason to think out the assault plan for the antechamber. He stood motionless for a moment, before forcing himself out of his stupor and into action.

"Victoria, I want a full schematic of that chamber, and whatever readings we have of what's inside."

In the darkened corridors of the Hornet, Corporal Williams nodded to his squad mate, and the Private let loose a hail of fire down the hall. At that moment, Williams bolted from his doorway and to another farther down the hall, away from the Brutes. Once Williams was behind cover again, Private Johansen pulled back into his own doorway.

The rest of Williams' team had been wiped out, picked off one at a time by the Brute's lasers. He and Johansen were retreating, desperately trying to reach the next security point. Williams looked

down at the ammo counter on his rifle, noting dismally that it read only twenty. Twenty rounds left, and then he would be reduced to his sidearm.

He clicked his fire selector switch to three round burst and swung out into the hall. He fired twice and stopped as Johansen burst from his hiding place and sprinted down the corridor. Laser fire blasted from the opposite end and flashed across his shields, draining them completely, but Johansen reached the safety of the end of the hall. Williams returned fire, until his rifle was empty and he in turn sprinted down the hall.

Once around the corner and out of danger, the two Marines began running full speed to the next security point, manned by more Marines. Hopefully there, behind prepared barricades, they could halt the Brutes' advance, or at least slow them enough to allow the Spartans to arrive and combat the invaders.

The Brutes howled and ran after the Marines, easily closing the distance. Williams and Johansen put every ounce of will into making it to the next security detail, but the rapidity of the Brutes' advance made it clear there would be no escape. Williams could practically feel the Brute on his back and was resigning himself to his fate when an act of god occurred.

Williams' world turned upside down as some unseen force hurled him from the Brute's path. He cried out in surprise as the Brute skidded to a stop, equally confused. The Brute was suddenly lifted from its feet and straight into the air. Its arms and legs lashed out, smashing dents into the walls and ceiling, a testament to the Brute's pure strength.

Before it could find purchase on its attacker, the Brute was torn in twain. Armor plates at the hip strained and warped as the body was ripped in half. A last death rattle rolled off the Brute's tongue as its partner stared in astonishment and fear.

But that Brute would not go down without a fight, and lunged forward at where he thought the invisible attacker would be. The Covenant warrior was rewarded with a loud thump of armor on armor and the substance of some invisible assailant.

The Brute threw his arms around the ghost and squeezed, putting his anger and rage into the effort. Monstrous biceps tensed and flexed, seeking to destroy whatever it was that they held. This Brute, a dealer of death and destruction, was unaccustomed to being unable to destroy whatever it held. For seconds it strained, as the two Marines watched in amazement. Blood vessels burst inside its neck as the Brute put forth its maximum effort.

But before any sign of a kill manifested, the invisible warrior smashed down onto the Brute's head and completely pulverized the rock hard skull and brain. The body of the Brute seemed unwilling to release its prey, but never the less, slumped to the deck when the phantom pushed it away.

Williams and Johansen peered into the darkness, vainly trying to catch a glimpse of their savior. A hauntingly vacant voice pierced the pseudo night and floated to them from farther down the hall.

"Semper Fi Marines... We'll take care of these animals..."

Master Chief and the Blue team Spartans jumped back aboard the Hornet inside their training room, knowing it would be clear still. They immediately began moving to the bridge while the Chief opened a link to the Admiral.

"Admiral Cole, we are aboard and approaching the bridge. What is the situation?"

"Chief, the Brutes have been neutralized. The Marine security detail was able to beat them back and destroy them in the landing bay. We have captured the Covenant shuttle and teams are in the process of securing the ship."

John was startled to hear that the Marines had managed to beat back a Covenant boarding party, and stood motionless in front of the Admiral. Then before he had fully comprehended what had happened, a voice called out across the deck.

"Thank you Master Chief, for your quick response. But fortunately for us, our own Marines were able to repel the boarders. You may return to your planetside operations and can also expect some, well... Marine support."

Colonel Ackerson stepped forward from some dark recessed spot on the bridge and smirked at the Master Chief. The Master Chief regarded him for a moment before snapping to attention and saluting the Admiral. Cole returned his gesture and the Chief about faced and marched off the bridge.

Once out of the bridge vicinity, Cortana whispered conspiratorially in the Master Chief's ear.

Don't worry Chief, I'll soon find out what he was up to...

End
file.